

Just as I am: the autobiography of Billy Graham. Harper and Collins. £20.

Just who is Billy Graham? And what exactly does he represent? These are questions that have been asked over many years and answers have ranged from the sneers of those who quite simply dislike him right through to a reverence so awesome that any God-fearing man on the receiving end would surely invoke the first commandment and run for cover.

Kenneth Leech once described Graham as an arch-pragmatist who avoided a prophetic stance at all costs, always preferring "safety, compromise and accommodation to the dominant [American] value system." Archbishop Michael Ramsey firmly rebutted the often repeated defence of Billy Graham that his admittedly simplistic message would be reinforced and developed by the ministry of the local churches to whom his converts were directed. It was there, the argument ran, that such elements as social responsibility and the critical dimensions of faith, so lacking in Graham's own message, could be layered in at a later stage. Ramsey dismissed such thinking as nonsense. In his eyes, Graham's form of evangelism cut at the very roots of Christian social criticism just as it subverted the possibility of a rational faith.

On the other side, of course, there are countless glowing testimonies from people whose lives have been transformed by the evangelistic endeavours of Billy Graham. Some of these border on sheer adulation. He once received a note from a member of one of his massed audiences that ran thus: "Thank you Jesus! for Dr Graham!....I am a Christian, baptized twice. This year I've developed a problem only God can cure and I'm waiting and praying for his help. What I have is Amyothropic Lakral Sclerosis. Please pray for my cure....Please do not permit the unjust criticisms of pseudo prophets to undermine your strength....We love you. We hope you will honour our humble request to just meet you. God bless you.....God bless a very beautiful godly like person." Such appreciation isn't only to be found amongst the masses who flock to his rallies. They are institutionalised too, as when the Clinton administration decided to offer the Congressional Gold Medal to Billy and Ruth Graham in 1996. It was only the 114th time such an award had been made. As Senator Bob Dole quipped, "When the idea was first raised, it received something rare in Congress - unanimous approval." Dole went on to assert that when historians issued their conclusions about the most influential people of the twentieth century, "any such list will be incomplete if it does not include the name of Billy Graham."

So how do we judge between these polarised views? I dived into this huge tome [750 pages of it] hoping to find an answer to that question. Would it be "a momentous work of insight" as claimed on the cover blurb? Or at least, would it reveal sufficient self-knowledge on Graham's part to help resolve some of the persistent questions raised by his long ministry?

He sets out the framework of his life reasonably well, telling how he milked cows on his family's North Carolina farm, sold brushes to pay some of his educational bills, studied at Bob Jones University and Wheaton College Illinois, briefly pastored a church before going to work with Youth for Christ as an evangelist. The rest, as they say, is history. His 50 years of worldwide crusades have reached 200 million people in person while no one could begin to calculate those whose lives have been touched by his radio, television, newspaper, telephone and internet ministries. Throughout it all he has hung on to his integrity in both fiscal and nuptial affairs. None of the shennanigans of the televangelists for him. He's limited and declared the personal earnings he's taken from what has become a huge business empire (which his son is now set to manage). His marriage to Ruth is fabled for its faithfulness though some interesting details creep round the edge of the rosy colours in which it's painted in the pages of this book. The long separations from her husband were undoubtedly difficult for her to bear, especially in the early days. She wrote a poem in which each verse began with the words: "Love without clinging; cry if you must, but privately cry..." words which smack of personal experience. He, on his side, formed a resolution to hang on to his chastity by refusing to be alone with women who wanted to meet him, a practice he maintains down to the present time. He definitely presents a naive and clean image that is not without its attractiveness. But will it do? Or is it true?

He began the helter-skelter, whirlwind ministry of breathless evangelism in the years following World War II. "I wanted to be moving, travelling, preaching anywhere and everywhere," he writes arguing that, because of the war, the whole world was ready for the preaching of the gospel. At exactly the same time, and responding to precisely the same stimuli, the leading figures of what became known as the Beat generation (Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Alan Ginsberg) were also moving, travelling, exploring anywhere and everywhere. *On the Road* presented its own gospel, sex, drugs, and promiscuity. Graham's non-stop tornado of crusades, over thirty in all, from Los Angeles in 1949 (which he identifies as his watershed) till his first visit to Britain in 1954, can be paralleled by a similar criss-crossing of America by Kerouac's anti-heroes during the very same years. But the two worlds touch each other only once in the pages of this vast autobiography, when Graham visited a rock festival in Miami in

1969. He told young hippies they could get high on Jesus but clearly made little impact on the vast crowd. He realises that what was happening in front of him represented a counterculture of confused people but failed to see how his very own evangelistic style was contributing to their rootlessness. We needed far more analysis and awareness of the counterculture.

I was surprised that Graham's stated reason for accepting adult baptism was that he didn't want the lack of it to be a stumbling block in the minds of those he wanted to reach. He lined up with the Southern Baptists to avoid conflict and even his ordination was calculated to "give you standing in the Baptist Association and be of great benefit to you in many ways." This is pragmatism indeed.

But it's his relationship with nine successive US Presidents that raises most questions in this book. He loved playing golf with them. "This gave me not only a way to relax but also, when played with well-known people, a chance to exercise my ministry in an informal way." It went well beyond the golf course. Soon Ruth and he were flying on presidential planes, spending holidays at Camp David and Kennebunkport, familiar with the Lincoln suite in the White House. Indeed, there's a Rasputin quality to Billy Graham at times. Called in at a moment's notice by George Bush on the eve of the Gulf War, he prayed "that it would be a short war, that few casualties would be suffered, and that the Lord would have His way." He went on to compliment Bush on the television speech he made later that evening.

All of this of course is par for Billy Graham's course. He advised Eisenhower that racial discrimination had to be stopped. But his relationship with Martin Luther King and those striving to change America's segregation laws was brittle to say the least. Indeed, he was critical of King for taking his protest to the streets. Yet the half dozen references to King in this book suggest complete harmony between the two.

Graham was wedded to the idea that Communism represents "the greatest enemy we have ever known" and warned of its agenda for world conquest. While he criticises the activities of Joseph McCarthy, his own analysis seems entirely consistent with the Senator's. He particularly disliked the fact that it was wedded to atheism and sought to stamp out religion. He quoted one Soviet official: "We hate Christians, even the best of them must be regarded as our enemies." Yet everything he writes about Marxism could well be summed up thus: "I hate Communists, even the best of them must be regarded as our enemies." But he'd need to be blessed with the gift of irony to see that one. And he isn't.

His friendship with Lyndon Johnson went even further. There were frequent visits to the ranch and the two men, in pyjamas, were often on their knees in prayer together before lights out! "I did not avoid taking issue with him," writes Graham, "or probing his soul....I used to intimidate **him** (sic)." LBJ asked him for advice about a running mate in the 1964 election (as did Nixon a few years later). It's his relationship with Nixon which raises the most important questions of all about his ministry to America's political leaders.

Billy Graham was an intimate friend of Richard Nixon and wants to remind his readers of the true stature of the man. He is uncritical of Nixon's support in the 1964 election for the ultra-right wing Barry Goldwater and credits himself for Nixon's decision to overcome his self-doubt and run for the presidency four years later. He quotes Nixon's judgement that Lyndon Johnson's decision to stop the bombing of Vietnam was a great mistake with approval. Stopping the bombing would bring "big trouble." Nixon's mastery of the intricacies of world affairs made him far and away the most competent leader America could turn to. Graham keeps referring to Nixon's "noble standards of ethics and morality for the nation" and clearly, in his view, Watergate was simply a blip in an otherwise successful presidency. Nixon saw Graham as an open supporter even though the evangelist thought he'd succeeded in remaining neutral. The President crowned one Christmas with happiness by buying a special set of golf clubs which Graham had formed a particular fondness for even though they had to be found and procured in the South of France. This kind of camaraderie is surely on a level with pillow diplomacy and effectively weds the evangelist's message to the interests of the ruling group of the day. It simply has to undermine any claims he might make to offer prophetic leadership for Christians living in bewildering times. There is no critique of the racial problem, the Vietnam war, the intellectual ferment or ethical questions of the day, nothing. Just an invitation to "take Jesus into your heart" and a solidarity with the values of the American dream.

This book could have shown us how this immensely powerful and influential man has wrestled with his conscience and struggled with the agenda of our post-modern world. It doesn't and that suggests that no such struggle has gone on. That's a disappointment for every potential reader of these pages, whatever their interest or angle of approach.